

Evaluation Brief on the Instructional Teacher Leader 2

Background

A key piece of the Pittsburgh Public Schools' (PPS') Empowering Effective Teachers plan is its Career Ladder Opportunities, which encourage teachers with a demonstrated record of effectiveness to work with students who need them most. Beginning in the 2012–13 school year, the district implemented the Instructional Teacher Leader 2 (ITL2) role, in which teachers work with peers to improve instructional practice through the use of targeted, research-based strategies. ITL2s support and coach peers on planning and delivering content to all students. The ITL2 role, which replaced the Instructional Teacher Leader 1 and Curriculum Coaching models, works in a redesigned and expanded way from those prior models. The current ITL2 model is designed to leverage the skills of every teacher and support peer collaboration to increase their impact on students. Each teacher in this role earns an annual differential payment of \$11,300.

All of the district's Career Ladder opportunities are funded through a grant from the U.S. Department of Education's Teacher Incentive Fund (TIF) program. As required by this grant, PPS is working with an external evaluator, Westat, based in Rockville, MD, to evaluate the implementation and impact of its TIF-funded activities. Westat's evaluation work on the ITL2 thus far has included site visits to a sample of six schools featuring an ITL2; the visits were conducted in spring 2013 and focused on various issues around implementation. This brief takes a look at some of the major evaluation findings on the ITL2 that have emerged.

Since there were 40 schools within PPS that featured an ITL2 in the 2012–13 school year, Westat and PPS carefully selected the schools to participate in the site visits. In determining which six schools to visit, the entire landscape of ITL2 placements was examined and consideration was given to factors such as ITL2 distribution by grade span, PPS regions (i.e., East, North/Central, and South/West), the gender distribution of the ITL2s, and whether an ITL2 worked alone as an individual practitioner in his/her school building or with an ITL2 team partner on site. The visits to six schools selected based on these criteria, combined with a separate visit to an ITL2 training retreat, allowed Westat to conduct interviews with 15 of the 60 total ITL2s and focus groups with approximately 30 caseload teachers (i.e., teachers who were coached or supported by an ITL2), as well as an interview with the principal at each school. In all, 50 PPS educators were interviewed as part of the ITL2 site visit component.

Findings on Implementation

Results from the site visits indicate that the ITL2 role was well organized and generally well received in its initial year of implementation within the six schools. The ITL2s characterized the role as exhausting but also very rewarding. School principals welcomed the support of ITL2s with RISE documentation and with providing “another lens on instruction” within their buildings.

However, ITL2s learned that establishing credibility as instructional leaders among their peers takes time. Principals, ITL2s, and caseload teachers generally agreed that the ITL2s who were well known and respected at their school, or were very experienced in a grade level or content area, or had recent responsibilities for their own classroom (i.e., as opposed to being on a special assignment) were more comfortable in the role and were better received by caseload teachers. By contrast, ITL2 educators who were new to a school, or new to a grade level or content area, or had transitioned from a coaching or special education position in which they did not have responsibility for their own classroom were less comfortable in their role and found teacher receptivity to be a challenge.

The reaction of caseload teachers to the ITL2 conducting formal RISE observations of the caseload teachers, while positive in two schools, was largely negative in four schools. Many teachers felt that not enough targeted instructional support was provided by the ITL2s because too much effort was devoted to evaluation using RISE, as opposed to coaching. Both the complexity of and extent of paperwork involved in the RISE process were described as barriers to more targeted instructional support. Some teachers also described how the association between RISE and the ITL2 changed their relationship with the teaching colleague, and that trust was lost in the process. For better or worse, teachers see the ITL2 program as “entwined” with RISE.

The approaches to integrating the ITL2 model in some of the schools visited were found to be especially promising in that they could help diffuse some of the tension around RISE that was observed by making it a positive focus of professional development. Looking across all six schools, several suggestions for integrating the ITL2 role emerged, each of which is in keeping with the mission of the ITL2 role to enhance teaching practice.

- First, educators emphasized the need to establish the instructional credibility of ITL2s by allowing ITL2s to model instructional excellence, for example, by regularly opening their classrooms to visits by caseload teachers.
- Second, ITL2s should be encouraged to offer actionable next steps after an “observe and confer,” and these next steps should reflect content expertise and distinguished-level pedagogical strategies.

- Third, the number of caseload teachers should be reduced so that an ITL2 can be an instructional leader and not be burdened with too much RISE documentation. There appears to be an inverse relationship between a larger number of caseload teachers assigned to an ITL2 and opportunities for follow-up or next steps.
- Fourth, educators recommended allowing for regular feedback from the caseload teachers on the implementation of the ITL2 role within their building. For example, one principal noted that the ITL2 role is missing a mechanism for systematically collecting teacher feedback. The principal observed that teacher feedback is a routine part of professional development in PPS and thus should also be part of the evaluative loop for the ITL2 role.

Conclusions

Feedback from interviews with stakeholders conducted at the end of the first year of implementation indicates that the ITL2 role was well-organized, well-led, and generally well-received. ITL2s characterized the role as rewarding, albeit exhausting at times. Principals welcomed the ITL2s' support with RISE documentation and with providing "another lens on instruction." However, teacher receptivity was mixed. ITL2s who were well-known and respected in their building, were very experienced in a grade level or content area, or recently had responsibilities for their own classroom (i.e., as opposed to being out of the classroom on a special assignment), were more comfortable in the role and were better received by caseload teachers. By contrast, ITL2s who were new to a school, new to a grade level or content area, or transitioned from a coaching or special education position in which they did not recently have responsibilities for their own classroom, were less comfortable in their role and were not as well-received by caseload teachers. The reaction of caseload teachers specifically to the ITL2 conducting formal RISE observations was positive in two schools but largely negative in four schools. For better or worse, teachers see the ITL2 role as "entwined" with RISE.